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INDEX:

- (1) Editorial: Prime minister should reaffirm close bilateral ties in meeting with US president
- (2) Abe's first visit to US as prime minister: Need to rebuild trust relationship
- (3) Prime minister's first US visit: Wartime comfort women issue smoldering; Gaps in awareness of human rights
- (4) Abe-Bush summit expected to serve as new milestone; Domestic and international situations call for enhanced Japan-US alliance
- (5) Poll of HS kids: Japanese less eager than Americans, Chinese, S. Koreans; Only 8% in Japan want to advance in the world

ARTICLES:

- (1) Editorial: Prime minister should reaffirm close bilateral ties in meeting with US president

MAINICHI (Page 5) (Full)
April 25, 2007

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will leave for the United States tomorrow to meet President Bush on April 27. This will be his first visit to the US since he assumed office as prime minister in September of last year. The prime minister reportedly is also scheduled to meet with leaders of both houses of Congress. Although he will only stay

overnight in the US, the visit will provide a good opportunity for the two leaders to build a relationship of trust. We hope the prime minister will thoroughly discuss with the president such imminent issues as North Korea's nuclear development and abductions, relations with China, as well as future options for the Japan-US alliance.

Immediately after coming into office, the prime minister visited China and South Korea. As the destination of his overseas trip early this year, he picked Europe. Because Abe and President Bush held their first meeting in Vietnam last November, he put off a US visit. But it is quite unusual for a Japanese prime minister to put on hold a US visit for as long as seven months after assuming office.

It does not mean that a prime minister should go to the US immediately after coming into office. Prime Minister Abe has also said that we are no longer in an age in which the prime minister goes to the US on a regular basis as most powerful feudal rulers regularly visited Edo (the former name of the Japanese capital Tokyo) in the Edo period (1603 - 1868).

Some observers say that relations between Japan and the US are beginning to cool. This view must not be made light of, because Prime Minister Abe has not established a personal relationship of trust with President Bush like Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi did.

The defense and foreign ministers have made remarks critical of the US-led Iraq war and the Iraq-occupation policy since early this year. In the US, a resolution calling for Japan's official apology over the issue of so-called comfort women was submitted to the House of Representatives.

TOKYO 00001852 002 OF 007

In a recent interview by an American media company, Prime Minister Abe acknowledged that Japan holds moral responsibility over the comfort-women issue. But his responses made during this period were quite awkward. Abe, just after denying the government's coercion of young women into sexual slavery in a narrow sense, emphasized that his administration upholds the Kono Statement. Meanwhile, the prime minister sealed his lips when Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirofumi Shimomura made remarks denying the Imperial Japanese Army's involvement in the issue. Prime Minister Abe should take it serious that such a stance of the prime minister has negatively affected Japan's diplomatic efforts.

Prior to the planned meeting with President Bush, it is necessary for the two countries to coordinate their strategies toward North Korea. The Bush administration has begun to take a flexible stance by removing its financial sanctions on North Korea. Meanwhile, the Abe administration, which gives top priority to a settlement of the abduction issue, remains tough, as seen from its decision to continue its unilateral sanctions. Japan and the US share the goal of having the North dismantle its nuclear programs and weapons, but a discrepancy in their specific response measures is noticeable.

In reference to the idea of Washington delisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terror, the prime minister has said that he would urge the president to give consideration to a settlement of the abduction issue. It is necessary for the prime minister to confirm the president's views in advance so as not to trigger public distrust of the US government. At the same time, the prime minister also should explain his own views about the relations between Japan's role to have the North to scrap its nuclear programs and the abduction issue in an effort to solicit understanding from the US.

In the summit, the Japanese and US leaders are also expected to discuss China. Japan-China relations have been put on the road to improvement through Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit to Japan. We also expect the two leaders to discuss a grand vision for the Asia-Pacific region, including how to build a favorable trilateral relationship between Japan, the US, and China.

(2) Abe's first visit to US as prime minister: Need to rebuild trust relationship

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will tomorrow make his first visit as prime minister to the United States. A delicate gap is developing between Japan and the United States over the handling of such issues as North Korea. During the planned summit meeting with President Bush, Abe must rebuild the trust relationship between the two countries and confirm it.

It has been seven months since Abe assumed the post of prime minister and before he makes his first visit to the US. During that time, Abe traveled to China, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

Most past prime ministers gave the highest priority of their diplomatic calendars to their visits to the US, considering that country an ally playing a important role for Japan's security. They also deemed it decisively important in terms of Japan's peace and security for the leaders of the two countries to build a personal relationship of trust.

TOKYO 00001852 003 OF 007

Conversely, Abe's decision to put off his US visit reflected the existence of the firm and stable relationship of security cooperation between Japan and the US.

At the top of Abe's diplomatic calendar was his visit to China. This approach brought about improvement in Japan-China relations, as evidenced by such events as Premier Wen Jiabao's recent visit to Japan. Meanwhile, when it comes to Japan-US relations, the two countries have been in a relatively good mood as seen in such events as the Japan-US summit held on the edge of the summit meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in last November and Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Japan this past February. At this point Abe's initial decision seems to have been right, but this does not mean Japan is free from any worry.

For instance, a challenge for Japan in the area of security cooperation with the US is on the horizon. A major concern for Japan at present is that Washington appears to be narrowing its final goal in the ongoing negotiations with North Korea to nuclear nonproliferation and has become less eager to work together with Japan to resolve such important issues for Japan as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and a resolution of the abduction issue.

Behind this move by the US is the change in the power balance in the US Congress. The Democratic Party, which dominates Congress as a result of the midterm elections last November, is severely pursuing the Bush administration for its failure on Iraq policy. It is no wonder that driven into a corner, the Bush administration is trying to score diplomatic points from negotiations with North Korea.

However, if Japan-US relations became cool, that would simply give an opportunity to North Korea. Tokyo and Washington need to reaffirm strong ties at this point.

Presumably, Abe will convey various domestic moves to Bush in order to demonstrate the closeness of security relations with the US.

In doing so, Abe should convey to Bush that domestic public opinion is severely divided over such questions as the extension of the Iraq Special Measures Law, deliberations on the national referendum bill intended to set the procedures for constitutional revisions, and a study of cases concerning the exercise of the right to collective self-defense.

On the so-called "comfort women" issue, there is an argument that it is a human rights issue like the abduction issue. Given this, Abe should not leave criticism of Japan as it is if he hopes to maintain trust in Japanese diplomacy around the world. We hope to see Abe endeavor to calm down the uproar in the US via dialogue with the leading members of the Congress and media.

(3) Prime minister's first US visit: Wartime comfort women issue smoldering; Gaps in awareness of human rights

MAINICHI (Page 2) (Full)
April 25, 2007

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has shored up his footing through such efforts as his visit China, which has paved the way for improved relations with that country, which had deteriorated during the previous administration. Now he will pay his first visit to the US as prime minister on Apr. 26-27.

TOKYO 00001852 004 OF 007

There is a concern about his visit to the US, namely the so-called wartime comfort women issue. Large-scale demonstrations planned by Korean organizations will likely be canceled due to the massacre at Virginia Tech by a South Korean student. However, a gathering will be held at a hotel in a suburb of Washington DC on the evening of Apr. 26. A resolution criticizing Japan submitted to the US House of Representatives in January has magnified to cast somewhat of a pall over the prime minister's visit to the US.

"There has been an argument claiming that there was coercion by the former Japanese Imperial Army. However, there has been no fact that endorses the allegation."

This remark on the comfort women issue made by the prime minister on Mar. 1 was controversial. The New York Times reported that Japan is distorting the truth and hurting its honor. Other dailies also carried critical comments. The image of Abe lacking awareness of human rights has taken on its own life.

The prime minister has become increasingly impatient, wondering why they do not understand him when he said he would stand by the 1993 Kono statement.

The prime minister, who has been negative toward the Kono statement from the beginning, has worked out how to deal with the issue and decided that he would continue the stance taken by Kono but recognize coercion in the narrow sense of the term. Dividing coercion into the narrow sense of the term and the broad sense of the term and denying it in the narrow sense follows this logic. However, such statements by former Ambassador to Thailand Kunihiro Okazaki and others have muddled the issue and raised US distrust in the prime minister.

Describing the atmosphere at the Prime Minister's Office (Kantei) at that time, one aide to the prime minister said, "The issue has strayed into a labyrinth." The perception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is that there is little chance of Japan winning in discussions on this issue. When Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Junzo Matoba reprimanded MOFA officials over the worsened situation, saying, "Do not let the prime minister offer any more apologies," MOFA was enveloped by a somber mood.

The divergent views stem from a gap in the perception of the issue. About that time, US Ambassador Schieffer pointed out to Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, "If the matter is left unattended, it will become a serious issue." One former senior US government official advised: "The US can defend Japan over the Yasukuni Shrine issue. However, it is not possible to do so over the comfort women issue, which involves human rights. Japan will lose support for the abduction issue." The indirect reason for the views of the Kantei and MOFA being divergent is the decline in President Bush's political clout following the Democratic Party's victory in the midterm congressional elections in the last fall.

The prime minister, Foreign Minister Taro Aso, and Shiozaki met on Mar. 9 in the prime minister's office and unified the administration's stance into giving top priority to calming the situation. The prime minister corrected his stance and said on an NHK program two days later, "I would like to offer an apology to former comfort women from the bottom of my heart."

However, the issue continues to smolder. Deputy Chief Cabinet

Secretary Hakubun Shimomura, who is in a position of supporting the

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prime minister, rehashed the criticism half a month later, saying, "There was no direct involvement by the military."

The prime minister took a chance. He telephoned President Bush on Apr. 3 and explained his sentiment, "I sincerely sympathize with the former comfort women." The Kantei and MOFA were of two minds about whether the prime minister should telephone the president or not. They were concerned that the president might make an accusing remark. However, their concern proved unfounded.

Regarding the lesson of the comfort women issue, one senior MOFA official said, "Washington welcomes Prime Minister Abe's conservatism, but it is wary that it could lead to reactionism. The comfort women issue is an indication of such concern. The prime minister must be careful not to fall into reactionism."

(4) Abe-Bush summit expected to serve as new milestone; Domestic and international situations call for enhanced Japan-US alliance

SANKEI (Page 13) (Abridged slightly)
April 25, 2007

By Yoshio Okawara, former Ambassador to the United States, currently president of the Institute for International Policy Studies

A chance to deepen personal friendship

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who visited Japan on April 11-13, described his trip as "ice-melting" in contrast to Prime Minister Abe's "ice-breaking" visit to China last year. The two leaders released a joint statement on specific ways to build "strategically and mutually beneficial relations," such as launching an economic ministerial dialogue and cooperation on the environment and energy. I am delighted that Japan-China relations, which have been referred to as cold politically and hot economically, are finally headed for their "normal temperature."

However, with serious bilateral issues like the development of gas fields still left unsolved, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun's comment that there still lies frozen ground beneath the surface must be kept in mind. Following his meeting with Wen, Prime Minister Abe will visit the United States on April 26-27. Washington, which was visibly concerned about the interrupted Japan-China summit talks during the Koizumi administration, is expected to positively evaluate the new developments between Tokyo and Beijing.

Since assuming office, Abe has been extremely busy, visiting Asian countries and the European Union. For this reason, speculation had been rife that his US trip would not occur until the Golden Week holiday period in early May. But true to his words expressing his desire to swiftly visit the US once the budget clears the Diet in order to defuse US concerns over his ministers' criticism of the US Iraq policy and the debate on Japan's nuclear option, Abe has decided to visit there before the holiday period. I welcome his decision.

It is significant that President Bush will host a family dinner at the White House and a summit at Camp David to welcome Abe and his wife instead of ceremonial events, given his friendship with former Prime Minister Koizumi. They will contrast sharply with the ritualistic ceremonies held during Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Washington just a year ago.

Three major changes in domestic and international situations

President Bush seems to be hoping to further advance Japan-US relations supported by his strong relations of trust with former

Prime Minister Koizumi. His desire comes from profound changes in the domestic and international situations.

First, the Bush administration now finds it difficult to implement its policies due to stiff opposition from Congress, which has been controlled by the Democrats since the midterm elections last fall.

Second, although military operations in Iraq have succeeded, deteriorating security in the country and a delay in the reconstruction of the country have resulted in growing criticism in the US - a major cause of the Republicans' defeat in the midterm elections. President Bush has asked for sending additional troops to Iraq, while Congress is calling for a swift withdrawal from the country. In addition, given a lack of progress on Iran's nuclear development and the six-party talks on North Korea, the administration is under a storm of criticism from hardliners for making concession after concession.

US force realignment

Third, the dim economic outlook resulting from such factors as high oil prices, sluggish consumer spending, and the slow housing market has sparked strong public distrust of the government's economic policy.

In the United States, fierce skirmishes are already underway in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election. Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have reportedly raised 26 million dollars and 30 million dollars, respectively, for the election. Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney tops the Republican list with 20.63 million dollars. Former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who is most popular of all prospective Republican candidates, has reportedly raised 15 million dollars. National attention on three individuals - Hillary Clinton, who seeks to become the first female president, African-American Barack Obama, and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson of Hispanic origin - suggests that American politics is at a turning point, according to Harvard University Professor Akira Irie.

Under such circumstances, President Bush is being pressed to enhance cooperative relations with US allies on the diplomatic front. He is also certain to pin big hopes on his summit with Abe.

Abe has also taken a series of steps, such as the Defense Agency's upgrade to ministry status, a two-year extension of the Iraq Special Measures Law, and the establishment of an expert council to study collective defense, to push the Japan-US cooperative system forward. The question is Japan's response to the ongoing US efforts to realign US forces in Japan. I am worried that there are no prospects for the long-standing issue of relocating the US Marine Corp's Futenma Air Station to Nago.

The two leaders are also expected to discuss bilateral cooperation on global warming, energy, and other economic areas. I earnestly hope that the upcoming summit will serve as a new milestone for closer Japan-US relations.

(5) Poll of HS kids: Japanese less eager than Americans, Chinese, S.

TOKYO 00001852 007 OF 007

Koreans; Only 8% in Japan want to advance in the world

MAINICHI (Page 1) (Full)
April 25, 2007

High school students in Japan are less eager than those in the United States, China, and South Korea to climb the ladder of success. This became known from a survey conducted by the Japan Youth Research Institute to probe and compare the motivations of high school students in the four countries. In the survey, respondents were asked what they would like to do in the future. In Japan, the proportion of those who would like to enter public service was down about 22 percentage points from a previous survey conducted in 1999. This shows facts about the mindset of Japanese high school students who cannot have a clear-cut objective.

The survey was conducted from October through December 2006 with a total of 5,676 high school students in Japan, the United States, China, and South Korea. In the survey, they were asked about their awareness of things in store for them, such as their future courses, goals in life, and jobs.

"Do you want to become important?" In response to this question, those who answered they "strongly think so" accounted for 34.4% in China, 22.9% in South Korea, and 22.3% in the United States. In Japan, the proportion of those thinking that way was only 8.0%.

Respondents were also asked about jobs they would like to do in the future. In Japan, the proportion of those aspiring to become lawyers, judges, university professors, and researchers was down from the 1999 survey. In particular, the proportion of those who want to become public servants was down to 9.2%, showing a substantial drop from 31.7% in the last survey. The proportion of those who "don't know" rose 6.2 points to 9.9%

Tamotsu Sengoku, president of the institute, says: "Japanese do not face hardship in finding enough to eat, so high school students don't have the ambition to become important. In addition, the (high prestige) jobs are losing their attractiveness or authority."

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